

Saudi Arabia to vet use of Prophet's sayings to counter extremism

By Reuters

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Saudi Arabia's King Salman attends a meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin (not in the picture) in the Kremlin in Moscow, Russia October 5, 2017. REUTERS/Yuri Kadobnov/Pool
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RIYADH (Reuters) - Saudi Arabia, the birthplace of Islam, is to monitor interpretations of the Prophet Mohammad's teachings to prevent them being used to justify violence or terrorism, the Culture and Information Ministry has said.

In a decree, King Salman ordered the establishment of an authority to scrutinise uses of the "hadith" - accounts of the sayings, actions or habits of the Prophet that are used by preachers and jurists to support teachings and edicts on all aspects of life.

The ministry said late on Tuesday that the body's aim would be to "eliminate fake and extremist texts and any texts that contradict the teachings of Islam and justify the committing of crimes, murders and terrorist acts".

The body will be based in Medina and overseen by a council of senior Islamic scholars from around the world, according to the decree. The ministry offered no specific details of how it would work in practice.

Islamist groups such as Islamic State and al Qaeda have used interpretations of hadiths - numbered in the thousands and pored over by scholars for centuries - to justify violence and to urge supporters to carry out attacks.

Saudi Arabia's approach to religious doctrine is important because of its symbolic position as the birthplace of Islam, while its oil exports allow it to fund mosques abroad.

Its ultra-conservative Wahhabi clergy have been close to the Al Saud dynasty since the mid-18th century, offering it Islamic legitimacy in return for control over mosques and universities.

The traditional Wahhabi doctrine favours a strict version of Islamic law and a return to early Muslim practices, and views Shi'ites as heretics.

But senior clergy have denounced militant Islamist doctrines such as those of al Qaeda or Islamic State, while the government, which vets clerics in Saudi Arabia's 70,000 mosques, has sacked many for encouraging violence or sedition.

Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir said last month that thousands of extremist clerics had been dismissed, although he gave no timeframe.

The government has begun to promote an alternative narrative of Saudi identity that keeps Wahhabism as a central focus, but still allows secular themes such as nationalism and cultural heritage that predates Islam to shine through.

The ministry said the body would serve Islam by creating "a solid scientific reference to vet and verify the authenticity of hadiths", which are second in importance only to the Koran in Islam. It did not say what form the reference would take.

The decree issued by the king, whose official title is Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques - Islam's most revered places in Mecca and Medina - said the body would be chaired by Sheikh Mohammed bin Hassan al-Sheikh, a member of the Council of Senior Scholars, which serves as Saudi Arabia's highest religious body.

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